Children's Books and Motherhood in Japan[1]

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THE SEX ROLE STEREOTYPE that women are to be at home and men at work may be universal; however, the details of the division of roles and the depth of the gap may vary from culture to culture. Role division or sex differentiation is far more salient and extensive in Japanese culture than in other cultures, especially American culture. In the past it was explicitly stated that women were inferior to men and that women had no place in the world. Although it appears that Japanese women were given some recognition as mothers, it was not that women gained power when they became mothers but that motherhood was exploited for patriarchal causes. Japanese women were made to believe that they could become members of the society and gain a status slightly higher than the bottom in the family hierarchy. The focus of this study is children's books as the transmitter of sex-differentiated culture and as the means for women to fulfill their lives as persons.

"Females shall not be seated together with males after the age of seven." Most Japanese women have heard this lesson. Although all the public elementary and middle schools have been coeducational since the end of WW II, children are constantly disciplined so that they will learn gender-appropriate behaviors, including the proper use of women's and men's language.[2] Children's books play an important role in teaching children these stereotyped behaviors.

In 1978 some housewives formed a study group called *hashi* ("bridge") and spent three years analysing 118 picture books for preschool children. They found that most of these books were problematic, presenting stereotyped images of girls and boys or women and men. In 63% of these books, the main character was male while only 14% had a female main character, and this tendency was even greater in picture books by male authors. They found, for example, that boys are depicted as active, adventurous, creative, strong, intelligent; that boys talk men's language—assertive and strong; that boys wear blue, green, brown; and that

boys play outdoors. Girls, on the other hand, are illustrated as gentle, passive, weak. Girls easily cry, help mothers, and like flowers.

The finding that Japanese children's books are still very highly gendered is not surprising at all. Of particular interest is the finding that while mothers are present in many scenes in many of these picture books, fathers are usually absent. Even when the story does not mention the presence of the mother, the mother is present in the background in the picture, wearing an apron. This is a reflection of the reality of contemporary Japan. Japanese men are dedicated to their companies and they work long hours 6 days a week. The absence of the Japanese father from home places an extremely heavy burden on motherhood. Men's total dedication to work would not be possible if women did not stay home doing housework and overseeing children's education.

A questionnaire survey reveals how common it is for a Japanese father to come home after his children have gone to bed. One of the questions asked: How many days a week does your husband come home after nine p.m.? One third of the subjects, mothers of elementary school children, answered "almost every day" and 18% responded "about half of the week." This means that Japanese children don't see their fathers very much.

The expectation that a woman gets married before 25 and becomes a mother is extremely strong in Japan. A woman is not considered to be a fully grown person unless she becomes a mother.[3] In fact, when there existed the possibility of the female head of the Japan Socialist Party becoming the Prime Minister, some male politicians publicly expressed opposition and said that a woman who has never been a mother would not be able to fulfill such an important role.

The Japanese mother not only does all the housework but she also bears the total responsibility for raising children, and the responsibility is often equated with taking care of children by herself, namely, without hiring a baby-sitter or a housekeeper. Unless the child is in school or involved in other activities, the mother is expected to be constantly available and physically present. A young mother who cannot manage the pressure ends up having a nervous breakdown or she commits so-called "mother-child double-suicide," murdering her child and killing herself, especially when she lacks the support of other women.

The number of working women in Japan sharply drops after age 25 and goes up again around age 35, exhibiting an M curve. When mothers return to work after the child rearing period, they have few options other than part-time jobs, which are of course low paid, without benefits and unfulfilling. Mothers returning to work are willing to work on part-time jobs to earn money necessary for their children's education. A working woman would be frowned upon by the society if her work interfered with her motherhood, but she would be admired if she worked only to enhance the well-being of her children. The increase in the mere number of working women, therefore, does not necessarily mean societal changes in terms of sex role division.

There is no denying the fact that Japan was an audaciously sex-discriminatory society until the end of World War II. But the country has undergone unprecedented and widespread change during the postwar period and so has the consciousness of women. Japanese women are no longer satisfied with their place at home. They seek to fulfill their lives as human beings, not only as mothers. However, having grown up in a culture that continues to enforce the idea that being a mother is of the utmost importance for a woman, they cannot help being subject to the traditional value of motherhood. The life histories of two women, Mariko and Midori, who I met with during my investigation, illuminate the dilemma of Japanese women and the limitation of its resolution.

Mariko majored in children's literature and related studies at Ochanomizu Women's University, the top ranked national women's university in Japan. After graduating from the prestigious university, she became an elementary school teacher. She was dedicated to education and worked very conscientiously. After giving birth to her first baby, her health deteriorated and she could no longer be both a good teacher and a good mother. So, after teaching for six years, she decided to resign from teaching and to become a fulltime housewife and mother.

At first, she was wrapped up in her babies, but I suspect she missed her students, her classes and all other activities related to her work. She began to make her own picture books using the skills that she had learned as a student. When she discovered that there were other women who were making their own books, she organized a mothers' book-making group. They met regularly and learned various techniques such as book-binding. Each of them made beautiful one-of-a-kind books. They were not meant to be published; they were only for the benefit of their own children.

Making books for their own children is compatible with motherhood, and at the same time it gives mothers a sense of fulfillment. Group activities attended by mothers are very popular in Japan. The activities provide them with opportunities to meet others and help them avoid the isolation which is common among many Japanese full-time mothers.

As the children of the group members grew up, the women began to make books for outside readers. They gathered the folklore of the district and made a series of picture books on the basis of those stories. The local government, their sponsor, printed their folklore picture books for sale.

The activities of Mariko's group were reported in newspapers and magazines and Mariko was granted an award for one of her books in a hand-made book contest. Mariko gradually gained recognition as a mother talented in bookmaking. A few years ago, the government of her ward planned to make a picture book for the purpose of teaching children about equality between women and men using an essay written by a nine-year-old, chosen by the Ministry of Labor as the best out of 8,000 essays. They decided to hire a community woman to draw pictures for the book rather than a professional artist and Mariko was chosen.

The picture book was given free to all the third grades in the ward and teachers in places far from Tokyo heard about the book and requested copies. The Government printed a total of 10,000 copies of the picture book with Mariko's illustrations. And again several newsletters and magazines reported the publication of the book.

Mariko used to make picture books for the benefit of her own children, but now bookmaking has a different meaning to her. Bookmaking is something that she wants to do for herself and for her community. She receives invitations from mother's groups to talk about bookmaking and/or her books.

Midori is a mother of three children in her early fifties. She was also an elementary school teacher. As a teacher she found book reading a valuable educational activity to help students develop human sensitivity. Like Mariko, Midori was a devoted teacher and she loved being with young children. She did not give up her teaching career when her first daughter was born. But she often felt guilty about not being able to be with her baby all the time. When she had her second baby, therefore, she quit teaching and became a fulltime mother. Every day she read books to her own children.

She participated in the home library movement and soon became a local leader of the movement. In two places where she lived she led women's groups to petition the city to build a library or to improve library services. She was so enthusiastic about the home library movement that she enrolled in an evening course in library studies offered by a nearby university.

After ten years of mothering, she returned to an elementary school and now she teaches a course in children's literature at a university near Tokyo. She has published two books on book reading and receives invitations to various meetings to lecture on book reading.

It goes without saying that the rich spiritual experience shared by mothers and their children through children's books is valuable and that the contribution to the culture of children's books by talented mothers like Mariko and Midori is significant. The irony here, however, is that neither Mariko nor Midori were aware of the fact that they were forced to quit teaching, one of the few career alternatives open to women, because of the expectations of the sex-differentiated society for which children's books are partly responsible. One of the classics of Japanese children's literature that Midori highly recommends in her book is a moving sad story about a boy and his *self-sacrificing mother!*

When I was going to Japan last year I was asked by the chair of Media Task Force of the Honolulu County Committee on the Status of Women, Ruth Lieban, to see to what extent Japanese children's books have been degendered. It did not take much effort to confirm that the degendering of children's books was marginal. During the investigation, however, I realized that there was an interesting connection between children's books and motherhood. The fact that many mothers are involved in activities concerning children's books suggests the po-

tential for degendering children's books as well as the limitations to the styles of women's life. It is evident that the sex-stereotypes must be removed from the society in order for Japanese women to be able to find a real resolution to their dilemma. Degenderization of children's books can lead that change. There needs to be better communication between people who produce children's books, people who choose and use children's books, people who critique children's books, and women's groups like *hashi*. At the same time efforts may be necessary to degender the meaning of motherhood so that it will include fathers as well as mothers.

Notes

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[2]Japanese has several first person pronouns, *wata(ku)shi* (formal), *boku* (male), and *ore* (male virile), etc. Women can use only the formal one or its derivatives *ata(ku)shi*. There are many other forms which are only for females or males. See Reynolds (1985) for gendered forms. Japanese children learn to use these gendered forms from the beginning of language acquisition.

[3]Before the Meiji Restoration (1868), a childless woman could be lawfully divorced, regardless of the reason for the infertility. Because motherhood is the only ticket for most Japanese women to some social status, there is a tendency that the mother is reluctant to help their children grow quickly. Fisher (1970) has noticed this tendency manifested in the way the mother keeps using "baby talk" to the children for a longer period of time than the father.

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